

The Epistle
to the
Hebrews

by

Luke or Apollos or Barnabas or Paul

A.D. 64 - 69

What is known about the author:

- He was not one of the 12 apostles (2:3-4).
- He wrote before with the destruction of Jerusalem (ch. 7-8).
- He was well versed in the OT (98 citations).
- He wrote in a more technical Greek than the other NT writers.
- He was familiar with Platonic thought.
- He emphasized Jesus' earthly ministry and high priestly ministry (ch. 2, 7-10).
- He was associated with Timothy (13:23)
- He was in Italy when he wrote (13:24).
- He was known well enough to be accepted by the readers without mentioning his name.

What is Hebrews about?

The theme: perfection (maturity) in Christ.

The key verse: “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection” (6:1).

Why was it written?

Hebrews was written by a Hebrew Christian to Hebrew Christians

1. To show the superiority of Christianity over Judaism
2. To show how the OT Levitical system was fulfilled in Christ, who is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (7:20-21).
3. It was designed as a strong warning against the dangers of falling away from Christian perfection (5:12-6:1) back into Jewish legalism.
4. Also the author wished to encourage the readers who had undergone persecution and suffering for their faith (10:32-34; 12:3-4).

The superiority of God's revelation through His Son is demonstrated by 7 great descriptive statements about Him: 1:2-3

1. appointed heir of all things (1:2b)
2. through whom He made the universe (John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8: 6; Col. 1:16)(1:2c)
3. radiance of God's glory (1:3a)
4. exact representation of His being ('υποστασεως αυτου = reality, substance, person)(1:3a)
5. sustaining all things by the word of His power (Col. 1:17) (φερω = bear, carry, uphold)(1:3b)
6. provided purification for sins (1:3c)
7. sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (1:3c)

Keyword studies:

Better--Christ is better than

greater, superior (NIV)

(1:4) the angels

(7:7) has given us better things

(7:19) offers a better hope

(7:22; 8:6a) has a better covenant

(8:6b) with better promises

(9:23) offered a better sacrifice

(10:34) gives us a better possession

(11:16) a better country

(11:35) a better resurrection

(12:24) based on the shedding of better blood --the blood of the spotless Lamb of God.

Keyword studies:

Eternal--Christianity also provides:

(5:9) an eternal salvation

(6:2) warns of eternal judgment for those who reject salvation

(9:12) gives eternal redemption to those who accept it

(9:14) which is applied by His eternal Spirit

(9:15) gives to us an eternal inheritance

(13:20) which comes through an eternal covenant

Keyword studies:

Once (for all) --the finality of Christianity is summed up in one phrase: “once for all.”

Regarding “once for all” salvation, Hebrews says:

(6:4) we were, once for all, enlightened to salvation

(9:12) Jesus entered, once for all, into the holy place to obtain salvation

(9:26) He, once for all, put away our sins

(9:27) we will face, once for all, judgment without salvation

(9:28) He offered Himself, once for all, to bear our sins

(10:2) He purged our sins, once for all, by it

(10:10) He offered His body, once for all, for our sins

Hebrews 2:10 If Jesus was already perfect, how could He be made perfect through suffering?

Problem: The Bible declares that Jesus was absolutely perfect and without sin, even in His human nature (2 Cor. 5: 21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:21-22; 3:18; 1 John 3:3). But according to this verse, Jesus was made “perfect through sufferings.”

And to be made perfect implies that He was not perfect to begin with, which is a contradiction.

Solution: Jesus was absolutely and unchangeably perfect in His divine nature. God is perfect (Matt. 5:48), and He cannot change (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:17-18).

But Jesus was also human, and as such was subject to change, though without sin.

For example, “Jesus increased in wisdom and nature” (Luke 2:52). If His knowledge as a man increased, then His experience also did.

Thus “He learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (Heb. 5:18).

In this sense He was “made perfect” in that He experienced the perfecting work of suffering in His own sinless life (see Job 23:10; Heb. 12:11; James 1:2-4).

That is, He gained all the experiential benefits of suffering without sinning (Heb. 4:15).

In this way He can be a real comfort and encouragement to those who suffer.

Hebrews 2:17-18 -- Was it possible for Christ to have sinned?

Problem: The writer of Hebrews says that Christ “had to be made like His brethren in all things...For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (2:17-18). Does this mean that Christ could have sinned?

Solution: Some argue that Christ *could not* have sinned. They believe that our Lord was tempted like we are and that He can sympathize with our weaknesses, but He is incapable of sinning. In support of this view they argue:

1st, that since Christ was God, God cannot sin (Heb. 6:17; James 1:13), it follows that Christ could not sin either.

2nd, since Christ had no fallen human nature, as we do, He had no propensity to sin.

3rd, they observe that His temptation was only from without, not from within. Thus, He could be tempted without having the real possibility of sinning.

Hebrews 2:17-18 -- Was it possible for Christ to have sinned? (continued)

Other orthodox scholars believe that Christ had the ability to sin (since He had the power of free choice), but did not sin. In short, sin was possible, but not actual in Jesus' life. To deny this possibility would deny His full humanity. His ability to "sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:15), and would make His temptation into a charade. They note that while Jesus could not sin **as God**, nonetheless, He could have sinned (but didn't) **as man**.

Since Jesus has two natures, one divine and one human, a distinction must be made in what He could do in each nature. For example, He could not get tired, hungry, or sleepy as God. But He did all of these as man. His divine nature could not die. Yet He died as man. Likewise, they argue, Christ could not have sinned as God but could have sinned as man.

Hebrews 7:3 – Does this verse support reincarnation?

Problem: Hebrews tells us that Melchizedek, “having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.” Since Jesus assumed this priesthood (7:21), some reincarnationists use this verse to prove that Jesus is a reincarnation of Melchizedek. Are they correct?

Solution: No, this is a misuse of this verse, for several reasons.

1st: It says Melchizedek was only “*made like*” Jesus, not Jesus *was* Melchizedek. (Heb. 7:3)

2nd: Christ was only a priest “*according to the order of*” (Heb. 7:21) Melchizedek. It does not affirm that He *was* Melchizedek.

3rd: The fact that Melchizedek had a mysterious and unrecorded birth and death (Heb. 7:3) does not prove reincarnation—it was merely used as an analogy for the eternal Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 7:19 – Was the Law of Moses perfect or imperfect?

Problem: The psalmist declared that the “law of the Lord is perfect” (Ps. 19:7). It reflects the very character of God (cf. Lev. 11:45). Yet the writer of Hebrews insists that “the law made nothing perfect” (7:19), and thus God brought in a “better covenant” (7:22). This, he contends, would not have been necessary “if that first covenant had been faultless” (Heb. 8:7). So, who is right? Is the law perfect or imperfect?

Solution: The law was perfect in its *nature*, but imperfect in its results. It was an expression of God’s righteousness, but an imperfect means of making man righteous. Of course, that is not the fault of the law itself or the purpose for which God gave it. For the law was never given to redeem sinners (Titus 3:5-6; Rom. 4:5), but to **reveal sin**.

As a standard and means of revealing sin, the law was an impeccable norm and teacher. But it was only “our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24). Like a mirror, the law was intended to reveal our imperfections as we look into it; but it, no more than the mirror, was intended to correct our imperfections.

So the law is perfect in itself, as a rule and revealer of sin, but it is imperfect as a means of empowering us to overcome sin.

Hebrews 8:1 -- Is Jesus our priest or our sacrifice?

Problem:

Christ is presented here as the “high priest” of believers (see 7:21).

However, later Jesus is depicted as the “sacrifice” for our sins (9:26, 28; 10:10). Which is He?

Solution:

Jesus is represented correctly by both figures.

He is our priest in that He speaks to God on behalf of man.

Yet He is our sacrifice, since He offered Himself on the cross for our sins.

He is the offerer and the offered, both sacrificer and sacrificed.

“He offered up Himself” (7:27).

Hebrews 6:4-6 (also **10:26-31**) Do these passages teach that it is possible for Christians to lose their salvation?

Solution: There are two basic interpretations of this passage. Some take it to refer to *believers* and others to *unbelievers*.

Those who say this refers to *unbelievers* argue that all of these characteristics could belong to those who merely *profess* Christianity but who do not really *possess* the Holy Spirit. They note that they are not depicted in the normal ways of describing a true Christian, such as being “born again” (John 3:3), being “in Christ” (Eph. 1:3), or being “sealed” by the Holy Spirit (4:30).

They point to Judas Iscariot as a classic example. He walked with the Lord, was sent out and commissioned by Jesus on missions having “power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of diseases” (Matt. 10:1). However, Jesus, in His prayer in John's gospel, spoke of Judas as “the son of perdition” (John 17:12).

Hebrews 6:4-6 (also **10:26-31**) (continued)

There are several problems with taking this to refer to unbelievers, even for those who hold that a believer can lose his or her salvation (i.e., Wesleyan Arminians). First, the passage declares emphatically that “it is impossible...to renew them again to repentance” (Heb. 6:4-6), but no Wesleyan believes that, once a person has backslidden, it is impossible for him to be saved again. Further, while the description of their spiritual status differs from other ways of expressing it in the NT, some of the phrases are very difficult to take any other way than that the person was saved. For example:

- (1) those spoken of had experienced “repentance” (v.6), which is the condition of salvation (Acts 17:30);
- (2) they were “enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift” (Heb. 6:4);
- (3) they were “partakers of the Holy Spirit” (v. 4);
- (4) they had “tasted the good word of God” (v. 5); and
- (5) they have tasted the “powers of the age to come” (v. 5).

Of course, if they were believers, then the question arises as to their status after they had “fallen away” (v. 6).

Hebrews 6:4-6 (also **10:26-31**) (continued)

Here interpretations differ along theological lines.

Classical Arminians argue that these people actually lose their salvation, but only for the sin of apostasy. However, the text indicates that they cannot be saved again, something even Wesleyan Arminians reject.

On the other hand, those who hold a Calvinistic point of view note several facts.

- (1) The word for “fall away” (*parapito*) does not indicate a one-way action. Rather, it is the word for “drift,” indicating that the status of the individuals is not hopeless.
- (2) The fact that it is “impossible” for them to repent again indicates the *once-for-all* nature of repentance. In other words, they don't need to repent again since they did it once and that is all that is necessary for “eternal redemption” (9:12).
- (3) The text seems to indicate that there is no more need for “drifters” (backsliders) to repent again and get saved all over anymore than there is for Christ to die again on the cross (6:6).
- (4) The writer of Hebrews calls those he is warning “beloved,” a term hardly appropriate for unbelievers.

When Critics Ask by N. Geisler & T. Howe, 1992, p.514.

The climactic exhortation toward which the entire letter is building is this:

¹“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”

Hebrews 12:1-4